



From Exclusion to Empowerment: **Gender-Transformative Solutions for Addressing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and Education Barriers in Mulanjo, Kenya**

CASE STUDY – SUMMARY
Kenya Red Cross Society & Finnish Red Cross
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Context

Kenya faces high rates of gender-based violence, early marriage, and educational disparities, particularly in rural areas like Tana River County. According to national data, 34% of Kenyan women have experienced physical violence since age 15, with Tana River reporting some of the highest rates of early marriage and female genital mutilation. The Mulanjo locality is on the outskirts of Tana River County, bordering Garissa count, in the Eastern part of Kenya.

Project overview

The Mulanjo Gender-Transformative Village Savings and Loan Association Initiative (VSLA), led by the Kenya Red Cross Society (KRCS) and supported by the Finnish Red Cross (FRCS), was launched in 2024 to address the intersection of economic exclusion, low literacy, and harmful gender norms in Tana River County.

Rooted in a Rapid Gender Assessment, the program introduced a holistic approach to empower women and men, promote child protection, and increase access to education.

Through the integration of adult literacy, financial training, and community-led protection mechanisms, participants – many of whom were survivors of gender-based violence or persons living with disabilities – gained skills in business, reading, and numeracy. They formed savings groups, accessed start-up capital, and committed to ensuring their children's regular school attendance.

Female and Male Champions emerged as local leaders, shifting harmful gender norms, preventing early marriage, and reinforcing community referral systems. Religious leaders embedded gender-transformative messages in their teachings, further amplifying community awareness.

By linking economic empowerment with education and protection, the initiative demonstrated measurable outcomes in children's school attendance, business development, and gender norm transformation. As knowledge circulated within households and community structures, sustainable change began to take root.



Key components / Successes

A multi-sectoral approach to gender transformation

The program incorporated literacy classes that enabled adults to read, write, and manage finances – skills that allowed women to sign documents, conduct transactions, and support their children’s schoolwork.

VSLAs offered capital and training, allowing participants to start or expand businesses and reduce dependence on partners. This led to increased household decision-making power for women.

Education became a key priority through conditional support, requiring children to stay in school for their parents to remain in the program. This approach transformed attitudes — mothers who once undervalued education emerged as strong advocates, while community-based monitoring helped curb school dropouts.

Male engagement also played a pivotal role. Men participated in sessions on gender-based violence, early marriage, and female genital mutilation, and many became outspoken allies for change. Religious leaders reinforced these efforts by integrating protection messages into sermons and madrasa teachings, helping to break deep-rooted taboos.

Trained Community Champions detected and reported cases of gender-based violence, increasing survivors’ awareness of available services and encouraging them to seek help. To strengthen the response system, KRCS partnered with a local organization, Roots, enhancing referral pathways and providing transport, case management, and safe housing for survivors.





The Catchero initiative: Community-led protection

Emerging organically from the program, Catchero is a voluntary group of trained men and women who monitor their community for early warning signs of school dropout, gender-based violence and child marriage. They discreetly report cases and collaborate with local leaders to ensure timely interventions.

An interviewed member reported that before, when a child was missing from school, people would look the other way. Now, people ask questions and act when necessary. One notable case involved a grade-nine girl at risk of early marriage. The GBV Watch Group, Catcheros, and local authorities, including the chief, intervened to stop the arrangement. Religious leaders and community advocates ensured the girl returned to school.

Education and child protection outcomes

The initiative directly supported 107 children with school fees, uniforms, and materials.

Informal monitoring by the Champions further helped prevent drop-outs. School health clubs trained 30 adolescents on hygiene, sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equality. The provision of menstrual hygiene materials helped lower absenteeism and continued community engagement reinforced the importance of education.

Cases of early marriage and pregnancy declined. Several girls at risk were successfully returned to school through swift community action. Protection mechanisms now identify cases earlier, and community accountability has improved.

A 14-year-old girl's forced marriage stopped

In November 2024, a 14-year-old girl was set to be married to an older man in the neighbouring Garissa County. When Male Champions and community members were alerted, they quickly reported the case to the police and school authorities.

The marriage was stopped, and an agreement was made at the police station that the girl would remain in school. However, the case also highlighted ongoing challenges, as corruption led to the release of the man involved.

Challenges and remaining issues

Despite progress, some challenges persist and need further attention:

- Resistance to fully abandoning female genital mutilation remains, with some advocating for less invasive forms. Continued dialogue with religious and community leaders is needed.
- Economic barriers also limit business sustainability.
- Law enforcement gaps and corruption hinder justice for survivors.
- Infrastructure limitations affect school retention for girls.

Lessons learned

Economic empowerment supports protection and education outcomes.

1. Women's financial independence led to fewer harmful coping mechanisms.
2. Male engagement accelerated change at the household level.
3. Linking Village Savings and Loan Associations with community protection ensured sustainability.
4. Long-term transformation requires ongoing dialogue with religious and cultural leaders.

Conclusion

The experiences in Mulanjo highlight that gender-transformative change is strongest when economic, social, and protection strategies are linked. The focus on women's economic empowerment, while actively engaging men, has proven effective in shifting harmful gender norms and strengthening community resilience through integrated education, financial autonomy, and protection mechanisms.

To ensure long-term impact, sustained efforts are needed to engage and empower both women and men, while strengthening community-driven mechanisms such as VSLA groups, female and male champions, and Catchero networks. Expanding multi-stakeholder engagement, particularly with religious and cultural leaders, local governments and the private sector, will be essential in scaling and sustaining these efforts.

Given its success in Mulanjo, this model has the potential to be adapted and replicated in other regions facing similar challenges.



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